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Chapter 7

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: NORMAN MAILER AND TOM WOLFE, TWO LEADERS OF “NEW JOURNALISM” OR WRITERS STRIVING TO CREATE THE “GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL”?

Keywords: doubling, New Journalism, Mailer, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, *The Executioner's Song*, Wolfe

MFS: How have Norman Mailer (1923-2007) and Tom Wolfe (1931-), each in their own idiosyncratic way, contributed to “New Journalism”?

DS: Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson compiled and published an anthology of journalistic essays in 1973 entitled *The New Journalism*. The writers featured included, among others, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson, and, of course, Tom Wolfe. The book gave the theoretical underpinnings for Wolfe’s advocacy of a new kind of journalism practiced in the 1960s and 1970s that challenged the predominance of literary fiction.

How did New Journalism accomplish this? It utilized literary techniques to transform the staid old world of “fact-based reporting” into emotionally driven stories that brought to life both the characters and the unfolding drama. This was accomplished by four principal literary devices: scene-by-scene construction, that is, events that are presented in a moment by moment sequence; dialogue that brings events to life cinematically; the vivid characterization of changing points of view that succeed in placing the reader inside the minds and motivations of the characters, and a focus on, as Wolfe called it, the “society, the social tableau, manners and morals” that he added, borrowing from Trollope, depict “the way we live now” (Wolfe cited in Sheets, 2007a).

Following the phenomenal success of his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987)—hands down the best 20th century novel about New York, Wall Street, and greed—Wolfe published in *Harper's Magazine* his literary manifesto, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast”

(1989). If his edited collection *The New Journalism*, which celebrated creative nonfiction at the expense of fiction, was round one of Wolfe's onslaught against the literary establishment, the "Billion-Footed Beast" was the second salvo.

The premise of his literary manifesto was simple. After the pioneering era of realism by American writers such as Wharton, Dreiser, Hurston, Dos Passos, Faulkner, and Hemingway came the "Neo-Fabulists", who were inspired by Kafka, Borges, and Márquez. Their ranks included, among others, Kundera and his American counterparts, Barth and Coover. The Neo-Fabulists employed extended monologues that were immersed in the murky realm of consciousness; they engaged in flashy pyro-techniques, and they flirted with metaphysics and magical realism. While Wolfe acknowledged the brilliance of a number of the Neo-Fabulists, nevertheless, he was at a loss to understand how their fiction illuminated the world, which for him was the primary mission of literature. Let me quote Wolfe directly.

They could do things within the narrow limits they had set for themselves that were more clever and amusing than anyone could have ever imagined. But what was this lonely island they had moved to? After all, they, like me, happened to be alive in what was, for better or for worse, the American century, the century in which we had become the mightiest military power in all history, capable of blowing up the world by turning two cylindrical keys in a missile silo but also capable, once it blew, of escaping to the stars in spaceships. We were alive in the first moment since the dawn of time in which man was able at last to break the bonds of Earth's gravity and explore the rest of the universe. (Wolfe cited in Sheets, 2007a)

Round three of Wolfe's assault against the literati was set forth in his essay "My Three Stooges" (2000). It was written in response to criticism from John Updike, Norman Mailer, and John Irving about his second novel, *A Man in Full* (1999), a blockbuster bestseller and eventual winner of the National Book Award for fiction. *A Man in Full*, following the methodological approach of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, was founded on realism and was plot driven. Updike, Mailer, and Irving attacked its lack of literary substance, which they felt was demonstrated by its prosaic style and its failure to illuminate the interior life of the characters. They objected to Wolfe's focus on the external factors driving narrative—social status, race, class, and religion, rather than the subconscious motivations that percolated up through consciousness. In short, they took issue with the very essence of Wolfe's style and narrative, which they regarded as journalistic rather than literary.

Other reviewers were far more charitable. Michael Lewis had strong praise: "The novel contains passages as powerful and as beautiful as anything written—not merely by a contemporary American novelist but by *any* American novelist". He noted, "The book is as funny as anything Wolfe as ever written; at the same time it is also deeply, strangely affecting" (Lewis cited in Wolfe, 2001, p. 149). Andrew Ferguson characterized it as "a masterpiece", an even "greater achievement than 'Bonfire': richer, deeper, more touching and more humane" (Ferguson cited in Wolfe, 2001, p. 149). Tom Wolfe's portrait was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. Paul Gray, its principal reviewer, stressed the novel's "ethical nuances and hell-bent pacing, its social sweep and intricate interweaving of private and public responsibilities, its electric sense of conveying current events and its knowing portraits of people actually doing their jobs". He added for emphasis, "Who, besides Wolfe, would have thought that banking and real estate transactions could be the stuff of gripping fiction?" (Gray cited in Wolfe, 2001, pp. 149-150).

Even if our readers have sympathy for Wolfe's critics, I urge them to check out "My Three Stooges" in Wolfe's essay collection *Hooking Up* before consulting the criticism levied against him. For whatever they may think of Wolfe's fiction, his analysis identifies the malaise evident in literary fiction today. Permit me to quote what I believe to be the most memorable passage in that essay.

The American novel is dying, not of obsolescence, but of anorexia. It needs . . . food. It needs novelists with huge appetites and mighty, unslacked thirsts for . . . America . . . as she is right now. It needs novelists with the energy and the verve to approach America the way her moviemakers do, which is to say, with a ravenous curiosity and an urge to go out among her 270 million souls and talk to them and look them in the eye. If the ranks of such novelists swell, the world—even that effete corner which calls itself the literary world—will be amazed by how quickly the American novel comes to life. Food! Food! *Feed me!* is the cry of the twenty-first century in literature and all the so-called serious arts in America. . . . The revolution of the twenty-first century, if the arts are to survive, will have a name to which no ism can be easily attached. It will be called "content". It will be called life, reality, the pulse of the human beast". (Wolfe, 2001, pp. 170-171)

MFS: How, then, would you characterize Mailer's contributions to New Journalism?

DS: Mailer's greatest contributions were his "nonfictional novels", specifically *The Armies of the Night* (1968), which won both the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction and the National Book Award, as well as *The Executioner's Song* (1979)—my favorite—which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was shortlisted for the National Book Award.

Before addressing Mailer's literary and journalistic contributions, it's important to consider Mailer's "theory of the novel" since his argument would define his later efforts to write the Great American Novel. At the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association held in Chicago in 1965—back when the Modern Language Association had substance, I might add—Mailer presented a paper giving his perspective on the modern novel. The following year his essay was published as "The Argument Reinvigorated" in his collection *Cannibals and Christians*. His premise was that no American novel has characterized the American story the way Tolstoy's *War and Peace* defined Russia or Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* characterized France.

No [American] writer succeeded in doing the single great work which would clarify a nation's vision of itself as Tolstoy had done perhaps with *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina*, and Stendhal with *The Red and the Black*, no one novel came along which was grand and daring and comprehensive and detailed, able to give sustenance to the adventurer and merriment to the rich, leave compassion in the icechambers of the upper class and energy as alms for the poor. (Mailer cited in Sheets, 2008c)

What was the basis for his argument? Mailer suggested that American literary fiction was governed by two approaches. First, the novel of manners, exemplified by Edith Wharton, and its corollary, the novel of consciousness, pioneered by Henry James, were perceived as decorous and refined, abhorring the violent and bestial undercurrents of naturalism, a literary movement developed by the French writer Émile Zola in the mid-19th century. American naturalism, appearing by the turn-of-the-century, applied Zola's principles to American fiction. Typically the writers—notably Farrell, Steinbeck, and Dreiser—were the sons of

immigrants. If the novel of manners and, by extension, the novel of consciousness were perceived as genteel, American naturalism, on the other hand, represented the demimonde where primal passions were the order of the day and life was lived deterministically, rather than governed by free will, with the outcome preordained by Social Darwinian imperatives (Mailer cited in Sheets, 2008c).

For Mailer, Dreiser's fiction, more than any other, came closest to realizing the Great American Novel. Ultimately it failed, he suggested, because of Dreiser's inability to understand the motivations and behavior of the upper classes. American fiction in the wake of Dreiser's novels, Mailer argued, became unmoored from our American story and, therefore, irrelevant.

Dreiser came as close as any, and he never got close at all. . . . After his heroic failure, American literature was isolated—it was necessary to give courses in American literature to Americans, either because they would not otherwise read it, or because reading it, they could not understand it. . . . It did not save their lives, make them more ambitious, more moral, more tormented, more audacious, more ready for love, more ready for war, for charity and for invention. (Mailer cited in Sheets, 2008c)

“The Argument Reinvigorated” was for Mailer what “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” would later represent for Wolfe, a personal manifesto of what fiction should be and why Mailer was the author best suited for writing the Great American Novel. This essay was, in effect, a proclamation of Mailer's intention to land “the big one” (Mailer cited in Sheets, 2008d).

MFS: To what extent do you think Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) succeeds as a Great American Novel? How would you compare it to Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979)? Is either novel “the big one”?

DS: I believe *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is one of the greatest 20th century American novels. For anyone who has ever wanted to understand New York, it remains a must read. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a panoramic portrait of the city during the 1980s. There was class conflict and racial strife: The city appeared to be unraveling. What was it like? Subways were caked with graffiti and frequently breaking down. When announcements of train failures and the necessary train substitutions were made over the subway intercoms, they couldn't be understood because the audio systems were faulty. Indeed, New York City's entire infrastructure appeared to be breaking down. Crime was prevalent. A walk in broad daylight in Central Park was an invitation to get mugged. The financial community was getting richer, but everyone else was struggling.

The Bonfire of the Vanities captures all that. In Wolfe's satiric novel the WASP protagonist Sherman McCoy is a successful bond salesman who envisions himself as a “Master of the Universe”. Naturally, it's beneath him to take the subway, so a cab drives him to his Wall Street job. Today, the equivalent for a successful Wall Street hedge fund manager would be a livery service retained under contract. Wolfe contrasts Sherman's behavior with that of his father, John Campbell, once the CEO of a prominent Wall Street law firm who, while semi-retired, nevertheless, continues to commute to the office by subway.

Even now, at the age of seventy-one, when he took his daily excursions to Dunning Sponget to breathe the same air as his lawyer cronies for three or four hours, he went by subway. It was a matter of principle. The more grim the subways became, the more graffiti those people scrawled on the cars, the more gold chains they snatched off girls' necks, the more old men they mugged, the more women they pushed in front of the trains, the more determined was John Campbell McCoy that they weren't going to drive him off the New York City subways. But to the new breed, the young breed, the masterful breed, Sherman's breed, there was no such principle. *Insulation!* That was the ticket. That was the term Rawlie Thorpe used. "If you want to live in New York", he once told Sherman, "you've got to insulate, insulate, insulate", meaning insulate yourself from those people. . . . If you could go breezing down the FDR Drive in a taxi, then why file into the trenches of the urban wars? (Wolfe, 2008, p. 54)

As a Master of the Universe, Sherman, predictably, has a mistress, Maria. He has a Park Avenue co-op with a hefty balloon mortgage coming due. One night Sherman and Maria are in his car headed back from the airport toward Manhattan. Sherman takes the wrong exit and they end up in a dangerous area of the Bronx. He leaves his Mercedes to remove an obstacle and two young black men approach. Maria slides over and takes the wheel as Sherman jumps into the passenger seat. As the car speeds off there's the terrible sound of the car hitting one of the black men. Maria persuades Sherman not to report the crime. The young black man from the Bronx, who was seriously injured during this hit-and-run incident, becomes a *cause célèbre* for a prominent black activist. The novel presents a panoramic portrayal of this unfolding scandal complete with the city's tabloid press, the seedy journalists, the contemptable lawyers, the contentious judges, the tarnished politicians, the disreputable black activist, the noisy protestors, and the Lamb family seeking "justice" for Henry Lamb. In reviewing the book Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, writing for *The New York Times*, praises *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as "an impressive performance".

What Mr. Wolfe does with this material is very funny indeed—funny and bitterly satirical. Everybody gets into the act, from the Bronx District Attorney who is running for re-election, to Peter Fallow, an alcoholic English reporter who is trying to save his sagging career on a daily tabloid. As Fallow's tipster says about the story: "And the great thing, Pete, is that this isn't just one of those passing sensations. This thing gets down to the very structure of the city itself, the class structure, the racial structure, the way the system is put together". (Lehmann-Haupt, 1987)

Sherman McCoy, implicated because his car matches the description of the vehicle, is questioned and later arrested. Maria flees the country. Later she returns for her husband's funeral, at which time Sherman obtains incriminating evidence from her while wearing a wire. Maria's grand jury testimony is declared by the judge to be "tainted", and the case is dismissed. The case is retried; however, it ends up in a hung jury divided along racial lines. A civil trial awards Henry Lamb a \$12 million-dollar judgment against Sherman, which he appeals. Henry Lamb dies. By the conclusion of the novel our Master of the Universe has lost everything: his wife, his daughter, his lover, his Park Avenue co-op, and all his assets. Sherman, now facing trial for vehicular manslaughter, seeks vindication and characterizes himself as a "professional defendant" (Wolfe, 2008, p. 682). The perception to the reader is that Sherman's legal disputes—and the others that seem destined to follow—will continue ad infinitum or, at least, until Sherman dies.

The story has perfect pitch. It captures the panoramic spectacle of New York in the “go-go 80s” with a cast of flawed but colorful characters drawn from all walks of life. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* delivers a painfully resonate portrayal of our failed social mores, our flawed legal system, and our disreputable tabloid press while illuminating the embattled politics in New York during that era.

But is it literary? I insist that it is, although perceptions by critics vary as to whether a late 20th century novel that is plot driven and filled with characters who engage in scintillating dialogue that acutely represents the world can be classified as literary. Wolfe’s New Journalism style works wonders with the narrative bringing a cinematic drama to life. Alas, the movie, released in 1990, never matched the power and impact of his novel.

The Bonfire of the Vanities is, in my estimation, the finest social drama portraying American capitalism and New York, its financial capital, in the late 20th century. For this reason alone, it is deserving of serious contention for the designation of Great American Novel. Published in 1987, it may well be the last successful attempt to write the Great American Novel. The first hardcover edition sold 725,000 copies. Then priced at \$19.95, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* gross sales totaled in excess of \$14 million. As of January 1991, more than 2.3 million paperback copies were in print and the book spent 41 weeks on the paperback bestselling list (“*Bonfire of the Vanities*’ Business”, 1991).

What, then, can be said about Norman Mailer’s “nonfiction novel” *The Executioner’s Song*? In writing this “true-life story”, Mailer consciously sought to surpass *In Cold Blood* (1965), written by fellow New Journalist Truman Capote. This nonfictional novel presented the gruesome murder of an innocent Midwestern farm family in Kansas by two ex-convicts. *In Cold Blood* remains, even today, one of the best “true crime” stories ever written (Graeber, 2013).

Capote’s use of omniscient narration to relay the story and his inclination toward conventional plotting seem almost neo-Victorian by today’s standards. By contrast, *The Executioner’s Song* suggests a new departure in American literature. It succeeds, I believe, in Mailer’s desire to create a “novel” that demonstrates “a revolution in the consciousness of our time” by “explaining America” (Mailer cited in Sheets, 2008d).

How does *The Executioner’s Song* accomplish this? Rather than a conventional linear story revealing the thoughts and motivations that propel Gary Gilmore’s murderous actions, Mailer has written a crime tale, Robert Merrill suggests, with “no fewer than one hundred Jamesian ‘centers of consciousness’” (Merrill, 1992, p. 155). Consequently, while nominally this is Gilmore’s story, the plot has seemingly endless digressions that flow from one character to the next, unfolding perpetually in the moment. It is a Western tale drenched in nihilism. The characters act without forethought or conscious motivation. How does the novel read? “It’s as if he [Mailer] has set a camera down in the middle of the event”, suggests Chris Anderson, “in the tradition of Warhol and cinéma vérité, and simply recorded all that passed the camera’s eye” (Anderson cited in Merrill, 1992, p. 160).

Remarkably, the “character” Norman Mailer, who features prominently in so many of the author’s other books, makes no appearance in *The Executioner’s Song*. However, Lawrence Schiller, his researcher who provided Mailer with more than “twenty-four thousand pages of transcripts from interviews” conducted with individuals associated with this story, features prominently in the latter half of the narrative (Schiller & Snider, 2010).

Mailer’s nonfiction novel presents the story of Gary Gilmore who, following his release from prison in Indiana, moves to Utah and shortly thereafter kills two men in separate

robberies committed over the course of two days. The story emphasizes Gilmore's short-lived freedom in Utah, his relationship with his cousin Brenda Nicol, his love affair with Nicole Baker and its calamitous breakup, as well as the spectacle associated with events leading up to and including his death-row execution. His request, ultimately granted, was to be executed by firing squad. The event was highly publicized. It was the first execution in nearly a decade, and it followed the lifting of a national moratorium against the death penalty.

Harold Bloom, in assessing "the novel", dismissed Mailer's literary effort, characterizing the work as merely the "triumph of the tape recorder" (Bloom, 2003, p. 2). Nevertheless, literary essayist Elizabeth Hardwick begged to differ, suggesting that it represented "the apotheosis of our flowering 'oral literature'" (Hardwick cited in Bloom, 2003, p. 2).

Permit me to provide one excerpt from *The Executioner's Song* to illustrate the frenetic energy driving this existential story situated in the heart of Mormon Utah.

Nicole spent the night at her great-grandmother's house where he would never think of looking for her. In the morning, she went back to her mother's, and Gary called not long after, and said he was coming over. Nicole was scared. She put in a call to the police, and, in fact, was talking to the dispatcher when Gary walked in. So she said into the phone, "Man, get them out here as fast as you can". (Mailer, 1998, p. 159)

As I've noted in my essay "Norman Mailer: 'History as a Novel/The Novel as History'", "Given the cast of characters and the nearly endless digressions, a synopsis of *The Executioner's Song* becomes almost futile. What matters is the existential chaos—actions undertaken with barely a conscious thought—presented against an unforgiving Western landscape". The result, as I suggested, is "a new-age gothic Western drenched in blood and propelled by anomie" that represents "Norman Mailer's most ambitious attempt to create the Great American Novel" (Sheets, 2008d).

No other American novel that I've read in recent years has surprised and enriched my reading experience as much as *The Executioner's Song*. At more than 1,000 pages, this "doorstopper novel" presents a harrowing tale of the loss of American consciousness that is exemplified by characters living perpetually in the moment. Their actions seem a stimulus-based response to pleasure and pain, rather than a reasoned reaction to the difficult challenges they face.

It remains one of the best novels I've ever read. It has a distinctive literary voice presented by means of third-person narrative, which is no easy task. Even more startling is that the narration is devoid of Mailer's monomaniacal urge to insert himself and his literary voice into every book he writes. A postmodern sense of vertigo ensues from having to interpret the story from dozens of narrators, each seemingly no more or less important than the next. The abiding sense of nihilism prevails as the reader is immersed in a violent and barren Western landscape devoid of meaningful historical and cultural references, religious and spiritual values, and deeply affecting family ties. Events appear to unfold randomly, without purpose or causality. This "nonfiction novel" breaks the "rulebook" of what fiction should be and how it should be read. It's a novel that dramatically conveys our devolution as a nation and a people. While it may have fallen short of Mailer's quest to land "the big one", it remains his greatest achievement and rightfully belongs on the canonical shelf of Great American literature.

MFS: Saturation reporting and “fact based journalism” are two terms that come to mind with these two. How influential have their styles been?

DS: New Journalism borrowed fictional methods, particularly scene-by-scene reporting—often written in the present tense—which placed the reader in the midst of the story. Consequently, the narrative was no longer consigned to facts written by a disinterested reporter. This necessitated that the journalist delve deeper into the emotional heart of the story by means of saturation reporting while, nevertheless, retaining factual accuracy. Thus, when New Journalist Hunter S. Thompson undertook to write *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1966), he essentially lived with a local chapter of the Hell’s Angels for more than a year. The resulting book placed the reader at the heart of an unfolding story that built tension and reader engagement because of the perceived sense that “I am actually there”. The techniques of New Journalism enabled the writer to get inside the mind of the subjects and reconstruct the perceptions and thought processes that drove the behavior and actions of those individuals under scrutiny. Thus, entire scenes of extended dialogue, often enhanced by quotations taken directly from tape recordings, would be presented to bring authenticity to the story.

When the New Journalists came to the fore in the 1960s and 1970s, nominally fiction was still the “content king”. That is, literary novelists—mostly male—were celebrated as cultural celebrities while journalists were perceived as engaged in a journeyman’s trade. Thus, when Hemingway was approached in 1933 by Arnold Gingrich, the editor of the newly formed *Esquire* magazine to write a sporting column, he replied, “I don’t care how much you pay”. Hemingway quickly added, “Hell, yes, I do care, but the big stuff I can always get by selling stories and you and I are just talking about journalism”. Consequently, he asked for only double the standard journalism fee, rather than the large sums he typically commanded for his literary fiction (McDonnell, 1994, p. xii).

Nevertheless, by 1973 when Tom Wolfe published *The New Journalism*, a new era had emerged. No longer would journalism, Wolfe argued, merely serve as “a motel you checked into overnight on the road to the final triumph”, which was writing the literary novel (Wolfe, 1973, p. 5). His book was a proclamation announcing that the New Journalists, rather than fiction writers, had moved onto center stage. Indeed, a generation later when Robert Boynton published his book *The New New Journalism* (2005), who could doubt Wolfe’s contention? Nonfiction writers such as Michael Lewis dominated the literary marketplace while novelists increasingly struggled to be read. The “content king” was indeed nonfiction, which was perceived as manly and engaged with the world. One only had to contrast Lewis’s extraordinarily path-breaking analysis of baseball analytics in *Moneyball* (2003) and its implications for sports and business—a “manly” subject if ever there was one—with the feminized and transgendered psychological narrative in Eugenides’s Pulitzer Prize-winner novel *Middlesex* (2002) to acknowledge just how far the literary novel had migrated from realism and worldly topics toward the feminized and socially “progressive” literary subjectivity of the 21st century novel (Sheets, 2007b; Sheets, 2008a; Sheets, 2008b).

As Jack Shafer noted in his review of Boynton’s book, the changes in journalism from the 60s and 70s to the new millennium weren’t that pronounced: “It seems obvious that the distinctions between Boynton’s species [of the New New Journalism] and that of Wolfe, whom he finds intellectually slippery and transparently self-promotional, are somewhat imaginary”. Shafer adds for emphasis, “And there can’t be all that much “New New” about

Gay Talese, Calvin Trillin and Jane Kramer, all of whom have been writing feature journalism since the early 1960's" (Shafer, 2005).

What has changed in the 21st century is the new medium, the Internet, which has diverted interest away from the solitary act of reading toward surfing the World Wide Web in search of diverting multi-media content. This has dulled and limited the literary capabilities of readers. Consequently, if they read at all, they are increasingly drawn to nonfiction, which is content driven, engaged with the world, and easier to understand than literary fiction, which at its best places demands upon readers to understand long passages with complex sentences and extended interior monologues, as well as necessitating that they interact with the prose to appreciate fully the intentions of the story. In the face of a diminishing audience who are less sophisticated in their reading habits, literary fiction by and large "dumbed down" its content and decisively turned its back on realism in favor of a politically correct imaginary universe in which feminized "virtue" and the progressive politics trump discomforting reality (Sheets, 2009; Sheets, 2008a).

MFS: Mailer appeared to write about "anti-heroes": Lee Harvey Oswald, Muhammed Ali, Pablo Picasso, and Marilyn Monroe. Wolfe, on the other hand, seemed attracted to heroes. Never was this more evident than in *The Right Stuff*, which was about the NASA space program. Do you agree with my assessment? How would you compare and contrast these two approaches?

DS: We might debate about whether Oswald, Ali, Picasso, and Monroe should all be grouped together as "anti-heroes", but I understand what you're trying to say. So let's look at the differing approaches that Mailer and Wolfe take on NASA and the Space Program, which, I believe, affirm your point of view.

Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970) began as an assignment in 1969 for *Life* magazine to cover the highly publicized Apollo 11 landing on the moon. It's one of his best books. In it he contrasts the power and success of NASA with the impending demise of the romantic artist, Aquarius, a.k.a. Mailer. For him, the marvels of science and technology are WASP-driven and soul-annihilating. He regards WASPS as "the most Faustian, barbaric, draconian, progress-oriented, and root-destroying people on earth" (Mailer, 2014, p. 10). Much as Mailer would like to mock their achievements, he envies their accomplishments. He acknowledges as much later when he admits to the reader (in 3rd person) "why he was so irritated with everything and why he could not feel a thing. It was simple masculine envy. He too wanted to go up in the bird" (Mailer, 2014, p. 95).

Confronted with the heroic success of the astronauts and American technological marvels at NASA, the romantic artist's ego shrinks (Sheets, 2008d). Mailer, the antihero, becomes melancholic. He acknowledges his marriage is failing. He feels disconsolate, "as if the moon had flattened all of his people at once". He blamed those "heroes or monsters, the Wasps" whom he alleges "had put their nihilism into the laser and the computer, they were out to savage or save the rest of the world". He wonders sourly, "And were they God's intended?" By contrast, Aquarius and his people—those vanquished romantic artists, those hipsters, those who embraced the sexual revolution, and the other assorted kindred souls—now appear in his eyes diminished, drunken, and defeated (Mailer, 2014, pp. 430-431). The book ends not with the triumph of the astronauts, but with a funeral, an acknowledgment of the end of Mailer's marriage, and the haunting sense that the triumph of science and technology is a

death knell to the artist. We, the reader almost hear the haunting melody of a dirge that foreshadows the end of the great accomplishments of humanism.

Wolfe's interest in NASA and the space program began in earnest when he was approached by *Rolling Stone* to write about Apollo 17, the final moon landing. That led to a series of four articles for the magazine entitled "Post-Orbital Remorse", published in 1973, about the depression experienced by some astronauts following a space mission. Wolfe then became interested in the entire space program and, looking to best Mailer, spent years working on what eventually became *The Right Stuff* (1979). It contrasts Project Mercury and its seven astronauts, six of whom ultimately participated in Mercury space flights in preparation for the future Apollo moon missions, with the personal heroics of Chuck Yeager and the generation of test pilots who, following World War II, demonstrated at every turn the "right stuff".

The book *The Right Stuff* is a true-life, action-packed adventure story, a celebration of American heroes. By contrast, Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon* is an anti-heroic lament, almost an elegy since, as I noted in my essay on Mailer, it "is the resistance, the reluctance, the braying voice of the Romantic Poet fearful that he will be unable to forestall scientific progress in an age when technology threatens to reduce humankind to carbon residue" (Sheets, 2008d).

Nevertheless, it's not enough to be an American hero and have "the Right Stuff". Wolfe must explain to his reader what exactly that entails. Here I'll quote C. D. Bryan's condensation of Wolfe's definition set forth in Chapter 2 of *The Right Stuff*.

Well, it obviously involved bravery. But it was not bravery in the simple sense of being willing to risk your life . . . any fool could do that No, the idea . . . seemed to be that a man should have the ability to go up in a hurling piece of machinery and put his hide on the line and have the moxie, the reflexes, the experience, the coolness, to pull it back in the last yawning moment—and then to go up again the next day, and the next day, and every next day. . . . There was a seemingly infinite series of tests . . . a dizzying progression of steps and ledges . . . a pyramid extraordinarily high and steep; and the idea was to prove at every foot of the way up that pyramid that you were one of the elected and anointed ones who had the right stuff and could move higher and higher and even—ultimately, God willing, one day—that you might be able to join that special few at the very top, that elite who had the capacity to bring tears to men's eyes, the very Brotherhood of the Right Stuff itself. (Bryan, 1979)

The tremendous success of the book was compounded by the success of the film *The Right Stuff* (1983), which along with director Ron Howard's film *Apollo 13* (1995) remain the two best commercial movies on the NASA space program ever made.

MFS: Each writer sought to grasp the zeitgeist of the times. Mailer, for example, in his essay "The White Negro" and Wolfe in his article the "Me Decade". Your thoughts?

DS: Mailer's essay "The White Negro", published initially in *Dissent* in 1957, was celebrated by *Publisher's Weekly* in 2012 as one of "The Top 10 Essays Since 1950" (Atwan, 2012). For Mailer, "the Negro" is "the source of Hip", his "survival" predicated on evincing "the art of the primitive". He "lived in the enormous present"; he relinquished "the pleasures of the mind

for the more obligatory pleasures of the body". His music—Jazz—"gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm". Thus for the hipster, "jazz is orgasm" (Mailer, 2007).

Gary T. Marx, writing in response to "The White Negro" a decade after its publication, elaborates on Mailer's characterization of "hipsters". Mailer, suggests Marx, interprets beats as those who attempt "to put down their whiteness and adopt what they believe is the carefree, spontaneous, cool life style of Negro hipsters: their manner of speaking and language, their use of milder narcotics, their appreciation of jazz and the blues, and their supposed concern with the good orgasm". The embrace by whites of the values of the Negro hipster, Marx adds, represents a rejection of the white "middle-class culture with which they are identified" (Marx, 1967).

For me it's difficult to read Mailer's "The White Negro" today without feeling that the essay racially stereotypes African Americans.

Tom Wolfe popularized several terms that made it into the popular American lexicon: the "Me' Decade" (narcissism of the 1970s), "Pushing the Outside of the Envelope" (the phrase used in the space industry and by astronauts to suggest efforts to reach the absolute limits of the possible), "Social X-Rays" (those New York women who were so thin they seemed as if they might disappear), and "Hooking Up" (hint: more than just a meeting between friends).

Mailer and Wolfe were writers engaged with the world and that meant intuiting "the zeitgeist of the times".

MFS: Norman Mailer actually co-founded *The Village Voice*, which I have actually read on more than one occasion. Was this a political motivation or an attempt to avoid critics?

DS: I see it as Mailer's effort to develop a literary "hipster" vibe in what was then one of the "hippest" of places (Greenwich Village). *The Village Voice*, founded in 1955, gave him another means to exert his ever present influence since, as with Hemingway, Mailer had an incessant need to be forever in the public eye. *The Village Voice* pioneered the concept of an alternative "progressive" weekly. It was free. It combined investigative journalism with politics, culture, and social analysis. In its early days it featured contributions by famous writers that included Henry Miller, Katherine Anne Porter, Ezra Pound, and Tom Stoppard. Its intellectual heft has long since migrated to *The New York Review of Books*, which Tom Wolfe aptly characterized in 1970 as "the chief theoretical organ of Radical Chic" (Wolfe, 1970).

Alas, we're no longer a reading culture. Today's vastly diluted counterpart to what used to be the power and impact of *The Village Voice* of years gone by would be the satirical online tabloid, *The Onion*.

MFS: How would you characterize the contributions of Tom Wolf and Norman Mailer with respect to the literati and the quest to write great literature?

DS: Permit me to emphasize—again—that I think Tom Wolfe's contributions to American Letters have been enormously undervalued beginning with his nonfiction *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965), *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), *The New*

Journalism (1973), and, perhaps, most notably, *The Right Stuff* (1979), as well as, of course, his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987).

As a writer who has lampooned progressive causes in an age of political correctness, Tom Wolfe has never been embraced by the literati. But there should be no doubt that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a Great American Novel that even today is read by New Yorkers to rediscover or understand their fair city. *A Man in Full* strives mightily for the mantle of Great American Novel. I feel, unfortunately, it falls short. It's too weighted down by having to prove Wolfe's literary manifesto of what a great American novel should be. It doesn't have the ring of authenticity that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* has. That's because Wolfe, a journalist at heart, relies heavily on his reportorial skills to bring a story alive and had been away from the South too long to capture Atlanta (or any other big Southern city) with the dead-on accuracy he achieved with New York. His last novel, *Back to Blood* (2012), is a noble effort, but doesn't rise to the literary standards of either *The Bonfire of the Vanities* or *A Man in Full*.

Similarly, Mailer's enormous contributions to American Letters have also been overlooked. The reasons are several. Too many of his books were written with a pressing need for cash—those nine children, those six wives, those two expensive homes! Nevertheless, *The Executioner's Song* is his great American novel. As a literary novel pushing the boundaries of what defines literature, it's a near masterpiece of American fiction, far more inventive in its literary style than, for example, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* is an extraordinary timepiece. To read it is to travel back in time to the 1968 antiwar march on the Pentagon. *Of a Fire on the Moon* presents a very interesting portrait of America, a stunning contrast, as I have suggested, to Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*. As for the rest, other than his essay on what constitutes a Great American Novel in "The Argument Reinvigorated" and, perhaps, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket", which is about the 1960 Kennedy campaign for the presidency that was published in *Esquire*, I'm indifferent. Mailer blows a lot of hot air. As a narcissist he had a need to be continually in the limelight. A lot of his literary talent was dissipated. But I'm still waiting for a literary work after *The Executioner's Song* to surprise and amaze me the way that "novel" did.

MFS: In their personal lives Mailer seemed to be a volatile, harsh, acerbic individual, who had several wives and exhibited explosive behavior on T.V. and with respect to his fellow writers. On the other hand, Wolfe wore this white suit—perhaps to gain attention, perhaps to personify his southern gentlemanly demeanor. How did their personalities impact their writing?

DS: There's a recent biography *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* written by J. Michael Lennon and reviewed by Graydon Carter, the famed editor for *Vanity Fair*. The premise on which the biography rests, borrowing from Mailer, is that "every man is a marriage within himself" of two selves, a saint and a psychopath (Carter, 2013).

This duality was, Lennon argues, the essence of Mailer. Most everyone is familiar with the Mailer who stabbed his wife Adele at a party with a penknife and nearly killed her. Or his infamous feuds with Gore Vidal and one particularly memorable occasion when he head-butted Vidal in the greenroom prior to appearing on "The Dick Cavett Show" and then began a verbal assault not only against Vidal, but the host, Dick Cavett, and fellow guest Janet Flanner as well. Then, of course, there were many former members of various English

Departments (circa the 1960s and/or 1970s) that were verbally assaulted by Mailer when he was invited to give readings.

But beyond the expected episodes of Mailer behaving badly, the biography also gives us a glimpse at the “other Mailer”. Lennon recounts when Mailer was given publication galleys for James Jones’s *From Here to Eternity*. He was astonished by its literary quality: “It knocked me down, almost knocked me out. All the while I was reading it, I had a sinking feeling, ‘Well, you’re no longer the most talented writer to come out of World War II. You’ve been replaced’” (Mailer cited in Lennon, 2013, p. 132). Not only did Mailer appreciate the novel, he wrote a strong book blurb to promote it. Indeed, Jones would prove to be his most sustaining male friendship.

During the late 1980s, while at a party, Mailer bumped into James Jones’s daughter, Kaylie, after Jones’s death. Mailer mentioned to Kaylie one of his profound regrets. The last time he saw her father was at the famous restaurant Elaine’s in Manhattan. Then, as he was wont to do, Mailer challenged Jones to step outside and fight. Jones declined, saying, “I can’t Norman, I’m sick. I’ve got a bum heart” (Jones cited in Lennon, 2013, p. 518). Soon afterward he died. Mailer never forgave himself for having failed to connect emotionally with his closest friend during that last meeting.

I’ll cite another example. I was attending a writing workshop at Mailer’s home in Provincetown in 2012, shortly before the house was put up for sale. Members of my writing group were given a “tour” of the Mailer home. By far the most memorable moment came when we scaled the steps to the attic to see where Norman Mailer wrote. It was bare-bones with an unfinished wooden floor and a strictly functional desk, a place of no comfort, just a place for a writer who worked. But I noticed a plaque “Belleville” mounted to the wall immediately in front of me as I climbed to the top of the stairs. It served as a reminder to Mailer of how he nearly killed his wife Adele and was sent to Belleville Hospital for clinical observation. My conclusion? Underneath all the braggadocio was a man who gave pause each day as he climbed the stairs to the attic for the egregious wrong he has committed. That plaque was a constant reminder of his human fallibility.

Tom Wolfe, who grew up in Richmond, Virginia, was and remains, by all accounts, a Southerner. That formative experience shapes his demeanor, his social and political outlook, and, of course, his writing.

Anyone who has attended a reading by Wolfe in recent years is likely to have seen him wearing his legendary white suit. Why? Well, that’s what a Virginian gentleman of his generation would have worn during the summer. Then it became his writer’s uniform, a way of defining himself against all the rest. Wolfe, as with many of the Jewish writers of his era, was an “insider/outsider”. Wearing the white suit announced to the world his Southern “outsider” status and simultaneously his “insider” credentials as a genteel Southerner who had gotten his Ph.D. from prestigious Yale University. The white suit served another important role. It served as psychological armor for Wolfe. When he wore it he assumed his writer’s “persona” for his audience, which separated his public personality from his intensely private self.

MFS: Both of these writers have been heavily criticized. Has the criticism been justified? (*The Naked and the Dead* was once thought to be one of the top 100 books of all time and *The Right Stuff* is still read by many.)

DS: When it was published in 1948, Mailer's World War II novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, was regarded as one of the important works of fiction about World War II. It is ranked 51st on the Modern Library's 1998 list of the 100 Best English-language Novels of the 20th century and ahead of, I might add, Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Keep in mind that at that time *The Naked and the Dead* was published, writers seeking recognition, if not prominence, sought to make their mark by writing the great war novel. Indeed, Hemingway's World War I novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, ranked 45th on that list, was considered the novel to beat, which Mailer consciously set out to do. A few years later James Jones would publish his World War II novel, *From Here to Eternity* (1951), winner of the National Book Award and ranked 62nd on the Modern Library list. Many readers considered it then and now a better war novel than Mailer's. Indeed, as I have mentioned, Mailer did himself. Unquestionably, *The Naked and the Dead* was a success. In the first three months following publication, it sold over 200,000 copies (McGrath, 2007), and it remained on *The New York Times* bestseller list for 62 weeks (Lennon, 2013, p. 3).

Today, however, it's not clear how well *The Naked and the Dead* has endured. If we look at two separate lists of great World War II novels recently compiled, it isn't even acknowledged. Thus, *The Wall Street Journal's* "Five Best: World War II Fiction", published in 2009, includes Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (1984), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* (1951-61), Olivia Manning's *The Fortunes of War* (1960-65, 1977-80), and, most recently, Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2009). Nor is it mentioned in the "Top Ten Books: World War II in the Pacific" posted on Military.com, a list, I might add, that includes James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* and his *The Thin Red Line* in the honorable mention category (Beevor, 2009; Miller, 2005).

The criticism levied against Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe has been based on the notion that they aren't really great novelists; they're journalists. But the literary assaults over the years have been especially vindictive with respect to Tom Wolfe because of perceptions regarding his conservative worldview. The criticism against both Mailer's and Wolfe's books also represents generational differences. As Graydon Carter has pointed out, writers born the same year as Norman Mailer was born (1923)—Paddy Chayefsky, James Dickey and Joseph Heller—were steeped in realism. But after the Lost Generation and those writers who matured during World War II, came a new breed of writers by the mid-'80s, those "weedy, thin-haired minimalists who had learned their craft at writers' colonies and lived in college towns teaching in master's programs" (Carter, 2013).

With this change, I maintain, came the death of fiction engaged with the world. What's left are feminized, inconsequential tales of false virtue written by authors relegated to the academic ghetto. They have precious little experience with the world and have willfully turned their back on engaging their fiction with reality. Readers desperate for meaningful narratives that illuminate 21st century circumstances have little choice but to turn to what Wolfe called "content". That content, if it is to be found anywhere, survives in nonfiction and, sadly, only very rarely in movies.

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